Three Lines the Changed the World:
The Inimitability of the Shortest Chapter in the Qur'an

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إِنَّا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ الْكَوْثَرَ

فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَانْحَرْ

إِنَّ شَانِئَكَ هُوَ الْأَبْتَرُ

Inna aAtayna kal kawthar
Fasalli li rabbika wanhar
Inna shani-aka huwal abtar

Verily We have given to you the abundance
So pray to your Lord and sacrifice
Indeed your enemy is the one who is cut off

Chapter al-Kawthar (The Abundance) is the smallest chapter in the Qur'an consisting of only three lines. From a linguistic, literary, theological, rational and ideological point of view this chapter has the utmost significance. Being the smallest chapter in the Qur'an it is often cited by those who are involved in some form of polemic. This is due to the famous challenge of the Qur'an. The Qur'an states:

> "If you (mankind) are in doubt concerning what We revealed to Our servant, than bring a chapter like it…." Qur'an 2:23

Muslim and non-Muslim exegetes have commented that these verses, and other verses similar to it, are an open challenge to humanity to try and match the literary and linguistic feature/nature of the divine text. It is not surprising that this chapter is often quoted and its significance highlighted by those propagating the Islamic way of life.

This chapter is used as a proof of the Islamic creed. If someone can meet the challenge the text cannot be from the Divine. However if the challenge can not be met, even though

there are a finite set of literary and linguistic ‘tools’ at their disposal; then the question of authorship has great implications.

The Qur’an was revealed approximately 1400 years ago and for this amount of time the challenge has remained. This however does not mean that no one has attempted to match the literary and linguistic style/feature/nature of the text. Throughout the centuries thinkers, poets, theologians and literary critics have attempted to challenge the Qur’an. Some of these challengers include Musaylamah, Ibn Al-Mukaffa‘, Abu'l-'Ala Al-Marri, Yahya b. Al-Hakam al-Ghazal, Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad, Ibn al-Rawandi, Bassar bin Burd, Sahib Ibn 'Abbad, Abu'l - 'Atahiya and the contemporary Christian Missionaries who developed the ‘True Furqan’.

Without going into an analysis of why Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have agreed that those who have attempted to challenge the Qur’an have failed, the summary below should suffice:

> Even though the challengers have had the same set of ‘tools’, which are the 29 letters, finite grammatical rules and the blue print of the challenge – which is the Qur’an itself; they have failed to:
>
> - Replicate the Qur’ans literary form
> - Match the unique linguistic genre of the Qur’an
> - Select and arrange words like that of the Qur’an.
> - Select and arrange particles like that of the Qur’an.
> - Match the Qur’ans phonetic superiority.
> - Equal the frequency of rhetorical devices
> - Match the level of informativity
> - Equal the Qur’ans conciseness and flexibility

For example if we take Musaylamah’s attempt to challenge the Qur’an,

> The elephant.
> What is the elephant?
> And who shall tell you what is the elephant?
> He has a ropy tail and a long trunk.
> This is a [mere] trifle of our Lord's creations.

it can be clearly seen, with reference to the Arabic original, that the style of his speech is in the kahin style of rhymed prose. It lacks informativity and the words and phrases that have been used can be replaced with words that will express greater meaning and produce more eloquent discourse. In other words from a literary and stylistics point of view, this challenge fails.

In light of the above what makes the Qur’an, or in this case, what makes the shortest chapter in the Qur’an inimitable? To start, below is a summary of chapter al-Kawthar’s literary and linguistic features:

- Unique Literary Form
- Unique Linguistic Genre
- Abundance of rhetorical devices/features:
  - Emphasis
  - Multiple Meaning
  - Iltifaat – Grammatical shift
  - Word order and Arrangement
  - Ellipsis
  - Conceptual Relatedness (Intertextuality)
  - Intensification
  - Choice of words & Particles
  - Phonetics
  - Semantically Orientated Repetition
  - Intimacy
  - Exaggeration
  - Rebuke and contempt
  - Conciseness
  - Flexibility
  - Prophesy/Factual

Unique Literary Form

This chapter like all the other chapters in the Qur'an can only be described as a unique literary form. This means that this chapter can not be explained as any of the known literary forms of the Arabic language.

The Arabic language can be categorised into 'Prose' and 'Poetry'. Arabic Prose being further grouped into rhymed prose (saj') and continuous speech (mursal). Arabic poetry differs from Arabic Prose as it ends with a rhyme and is distinguished by its metrical rhythmical patterns which are called the 'al-Bihar.' There are 16 al-Bihar which all Arabic poetry, pre and post Islamic, are based upon.

This chapter is unique as its internal rhythm can not be described as any of the al-Bihar and its end rhyme and literary bonds differ from any Arabic prose. Therefore its literary form is unlike any known literary forms of the Arabic language.

For more information please see http://www.theinimitablequran.com/QuranicStyle.html

Unique Linguistic Genre

Like all other chapters in the Qur'an, chapter al-Kawthar marries together rhetorical and cohesive elements in every sentence. This is a unique use of the Arabic language as Arabic texts mostly employ cohesive elements in every sentence. Below is an analysis of this chapter in light of the above:

This chapter can be split into two sentences:

[1] Verily We have given to you the abundance so pray to your Lord and sacrifice

[2] Indeed your enemy is the one who is cut off

In the first sentence the rhetorical aspects are (these will be explained later):

- Emphasis/Intensification
- Choice of Word & Particle
- Rhythm and Sound
- Iltifaat (grammatical shift)
- Multiple meaning
- Conceptual Relatedness (intertextuality)

The cohesive device used in this sentence is the 'fa' particle (which is causative) and links the structure 'Verily We have given to you the abundance' with the structure 'pray to your Lord and sacrifice'.

In the second sentence the rhetorical aspects are:

- Choice of Word and Particle
- Rhythm and Sound
- Semantically Orientated Repetition
- Confinement/exclusivity
- Rebuke and Contempt
- Prophesy/Factual
- Word order and Arrangement

The cohesive device used in this sentence is what is known as 'Zero' cohesion. This is a form of cohesion where a cohesive particle like waw (and) or fa' (so) is not used. The cohesive element is easily understood via the readers' linguistic intuition. The whole structure relates to the preceding sentence, if it was not apparent then a cohesive particle would have to be used. The way the Qur'an achieves cohesion in this sentence can also be seen as a rhetorical feature, not using a cohesive particle in this case creates conciseness in language; any needless or repetitive lexical items are removed. If the relationship between one sentence and another can be understood without the use of additional words or particles then they should not be used, as this achieves brevity and eloquent discourse. This is similar to the chapter al-Ihklas (Sincerity).

For more information please see http://www.theinimitablequran.com/UniqueGenre.html

Abundance of Rhetorical Devices/Features

This chapter like all the other chapters in the Qur'an has an abundance of rhetorical features and devices. According to Abu Musa, Abdul Raof and others the Qur'an has a

greater use of rhetorical devices and features than any other text; past or present. Below are some examples of how chapter al-Kawthar achieves this 'sea of rhetoric'. What is meant by rhetoric here is what is known in the Arabic tradition as 'balagha', this encompasses the use of language to please and persuade; expression in the best verbal forms, eloquence and interrelation between style, structure and meaning. The list below is not exhaustive but sheds some light into this chapter's unique use of language.

Emphasis & Choice of Pronoun

إِنَّا

[*Verily, We*] This structure is emphatic (*harf al-tawkid*); also the plural is used to indicate power, certainty, ability, greater quantity or sometimes to stress the status and greatness (*li-ta'zim al-mutakallim aw ihtimaman bi-dhikr rabbika wa ta'ziman*). This is an apt choice of pronoun as its persuasive force can not be matched by any other pronoun. The effect is "The creator, who has power to do anything has indeed given you…."

Word Choice

أَعْطَيْنَ

[*A'Tayn*] This term as been used instead of *'Aataaina'* because of a subtle difference. The difference as defined by Ibn Manzoor in his *Lisan al-'Arab* differs conceptually. The Qur'anic choice indicates 'to hand over with one's own hand' whereas the non Qur'anic selection does not provide this meaning. This choice of word is apt as it strengthens the sentence emphasizing the surety of giving, ability, greatness, power and intimacy (to console and strengthen the Prophet).

According to Naishapuri this term also indicates the extra notion of ownership with it.

The verb has also been used in the past tense which indicates that is has already happened and makes it definitive. This further accentuates the meaning of surety, power and greatness. This also expresses certainty of a promise, in this case the Prophet will have al-Kawthar.

Word Choice

الْكَوْثَرَ

[*al-Kawthar*] The root stem for this word are the letters kaaf, tha and ra (=kathara). This signifies plentiful, multitude, overflowing, rich, unstinting and unending. Other derivations of this root include:

- Katha-ratun: Multitude
- Katheerun: Much, many, numerous

- Ak'tharu: More numerous (emphasis)
- Kath-thara: To multiply
- Takathur: Act of multiplying
- Is-thak-thara: To wish for much

Al-Qurtubi states that the Arabs used '*Kawthar*' to denote anything which is great in quantity or value. This word can not be replaced with another, as its meaning can not be matched equally with any other Arabic word. Ibn Abbas mentioned that the *al-Kawthar* includes all types of good. (*Ibn Abbas Tanwir al-Miqbas: this is of doubtful origin. However this is also the opinion of Sa'id Ibn Jubayr, 'Ikramah, Qatadah and Mujahid*.)

Word Arrangement

The placement of *al-Kawthar* is an attribute; plentiful/abundance. However this word has been placed at the end of the verse with no word after to be attributed to it, as al-Qurtubi points out, this indicates that the Prophet has been given an abundance of everything. The Scholars state that if God had bestowed one thing in great multitude then that would have been mentioned, however due to giving the Prophet an abundance of everything nothing is mentioned to indicate everything or many things. Also within the science of eloquence and rhetoric mentioning all the things would be superfluous and not a good use of language.

Multiple Meaning

The word *al-Kawthar* has been given multiple meanings by the scholars. These meanings include:

- That river of paradise from which rivers flow.
- The fountain on the Day of Judgement from which the Prophet will quench the thirst of his people.
- His prophethood.
- The Qur'an, no other divine book is as comprehensive as the Qur'an.
- The way of life called Islam.
- The multitude of his companions, no other prophet had that many companions
- Elevated status. No one is more researched, more mentioned and more praised than the prophet Muhammad.
- It is multitude of goodness.

Grammatical Shift: Iltifaat

إِنَّا ... رَبِّكَ

[*...to your Lord*]. *Iltifaat* is a unique rhetorical and stylistic device employed by the Qur'an. The Qur'an is the only text to have the highest frequency of grammatical shifts and related rhetorical features. In this Surah, there is a change from the first person plural [We in *innaa*] to the second person [*...your Lord*]. This change is not an abrupt shift; it is

calculated and highlights the intimate relationship between God and the Prophet. The use of '*We*' as described above is used to emphasize the majesty, power and ability of God whereas '*Your Lord*' is used to indicate and emphasize intimacy, closeness and love; this is an apt use as the preceding concepts are about prayer, sacrifice and worship. [*So to your Lord pray and sacrifice*]. Furthermore, the purpose of this chapter is also to console the Prophet, using intimate language enhances the psycholinguistic effect.

For more information please see http://hamzatzortzis.blogspot.com/2007/05/another-rhetorical-feature-of-quran.html

Conceptual Relatedness (intertextuality)

فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَانْحَرْ

[*So to your Lord pray and sacrifice*]

The '*fa*' (so) particle is sababi (causative) this indicates a recommendation to the Prophet to be thankful for the abundance he has been given. This conceptually relates to tawhid (oneness of God). The Oneness of God is the central theme in the Qur'an which permeates every chapter. The Arabs at the time of revelation would worship, pray and sacrifice to other 'deities' rather than God. Therefore this statement is not only a logical and rational concept i.e. to be thankful as a result of being the beneficiary of abundant good, rather it is to show the difference to the polytheists who would offer worship and sacrifice to idols. This relates to a major theme in the Qur'an, the oneness of God.

There are other verses that related to this particular verse, these include:

Say: "Verily, my Salah, my sacrifice, my living, and my dying are for Allah, the Lord of all that exists. He has no partner. And of this I have been commanded, and I am the first of the Muslims." 6:162-163

And do not eat from what Allah's Name has not been pronounced over, indeed that is Fisq (transgression). 6:121

It can be clearly seen that chapter al-Kawthar conceptually relates to other verses and chapters within the Qur'an. This feature from a linguistics point of view is called thematic intertextuality.

Word Choice

وَانْحَرْ

[*Wanhar*] The word '*wanhar*' is from the root na, ha and ra (= nahara) which means to sacrifice an animal by cutting or piercing the jugular vein. The word '*wanhar*' also has

the meaning of standing facing *Qibla* for *Salah* (prayer). It also means raising hands while reciting Takbir (God is the Greatest).

This word is the most apt word for the meaning of sacrifice as it has multi layered meanings which are most appropriate for the ideas and concepts that are trying to be delivered in this structure. Surely it is only out of God's Greatness that *al-Kawthar* is given to the Prophet and it should be received with thanks and sacrifice, which are manifested in Islam via sacrificing animals, prayer and recitation of Gods names (*dhikr*).

If anyone was to scan the Arabic language for a word that has such expression they would not be able to find one.

Emphasis and Choice of Particle

إِنَّ

[*Inna*] '*Indeed*' is used to emphasize and accentuate that it is the enemies of the Prophet that are cut off. The effect is 'you enemies are certainly the ones you are cut off'.

Semantically Orientated Repetition & Rhythm

إِنَّا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ الْكَوْثَرَ

فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَانْحَرْ

إِنَّ شَانِئَكَ هُوَ الْأَبْتَرُ

The repetition of the second person (*ka* = '*you*' x 3) is singling out/focusing/making exclusive the Prophet as the target of the speaker. The emphasis (*iqrar*) is a stylistic move to fortify and strengthen the Prophet. The consistent use of the second person establishes continuity in the verse and generates rhythm. Moreover, there is a juxtaposition between the *iltifaat* of the speaker (*al-mutakallim* = God) with the fixity/repetition of *ka* in the second person (*mukhatab* = Prophet).

Rebuke and Contempt

إِنَّ شَانِئَكَ هُوَ الأَبْتَرُ

[*It is your enemy that is cut off*]

The use of the word '*abtar*' (cut off) is most suitable as it was a word used by the enemies of the Prophet against him. This structure indicates that in reality the enemies of the Prophet are the ones who are cut off i.e. have acquired great loss. This is accentuated by the preceding two verses which are an intense, emphatic and exaggerated use of

language to show that all good has been given to the Prophet. The contrast between the persuasive preceding structures and the use of the word '*abtar*' gives the word more power and intensity.

Word Arrangement

إِنَّ شَانِئَكَ هُوَ الأَبْتَرُ

[*abtar*] This chapter uses the insult the enemies of the Prophet used to enhance the communicative effect. This word in the Arabic tradition means *`Leave him, for indeed he is a man who is cut off having no descendants. So when he dies he will not be remembered.'*

This return of insult is not merely done as a form of 'tit for tat' rather it is eloquently arranged as the last word used in the chapter to stress the meaning. The effect is, that it is they who are really cut off as the word '*abtar*' is placed right at the end of the chapter to allude to this fact. There are no words after '*abtar*' just like no remembrance and no offspring to continue someone's lineage *(Note: This is a linguistic indication and not a fact).*

Choice of Particle: Confinement/Exclusivity

هُوَ الأَبْتَرُ

[*…that is cut off*]. The *alif lam* (a and l) after the '*huwa*' denotes confinement and exclusivity (designates a specific person or thing i.e. the enemies of the Prophet). For the context of this chapter, the definite article (*al-*) may designate either definition (*li 'l-ta'rif*) i.e. refer to a specific person/thing or it may designate 'familiarity' (*li 'l-'ahd*). The effect here is that the enemies specifically and not the Prophet who are really cut off. Such minutiae changes the power of the structure, which is a great use of language.

Rhythm and Sound

The Qur'an has been described as an "inimitable symphony" whose rhythm moves men to tears and ecstasy. The Qur'an not only selects the most apt words and phrases, but also achieves a unique sound within a unique literary form. This chapter has the following verse end rhyme:

Kawthar
…nhar
…tar

What is noticeable about the rhyme in this chapter is that the end rhyme of the last two verses resonate the sound of the word '*al-kawthar*', what is meant here is as if the sound of the word '*al-kawthar*' is extended to support the overall theme that the Prophet has

really been given an abundance. It is as though the word '*al-kawthar*' has been exaggerated and phonetically elongated to further highlight its meaning and enhance the overall persuasive power of the structure. Please also see 'Semantically Orientated Repetition & Rhythm' above.

For more information please see http://hamzatzortzis.blogspot.com/2007/04/quran-and-sound.html

Prophesy/Factual

An interesting observation of the chapter is that it also is factual and accurate. At the time when this chapter was revealed the Prophet was in one of the lowest points in his life. His enemies were the ones who seemed to have prosperity and power. However, the reality soon changed. The Prophet turned out to be the most successful Prophet both as a man delivering a message and as a statesman. His enemies eventually lost their power.

However the Qur'an used the word '*abtar*' here, this describes the Prophet gaining power and success but it should also indicate something more specific for it to be appreciated as a factual description and a form of prophesy.

There are major opinions of the reason for this revelation. The first opinion is that Al-`As bin Wa'il would say, whenever the Prophet would be mentioned (in his presence), *`Leave him, for indeed he is a man who is cut off having no descendants. So when he dies he will not be remembered.'* Therefore this chapter was revealed to console the Prophet.

The other opinion is that Abu Lahab, another leading member of the Quraish, exlaimed *`Muhammad has been cut off (i.e., from progeny) tonight.'* when the Prophet's son passed away.

What makes this chapter a prophesy and factual is the events that took place after this revelation.

With regards to Abu Lahab he died of a form of plague and was not buried by his sons until one the leading tribe leaders noticed how his body was rotting. His sons eventual placed the remains of the body on a wall and threw stones on it. Abu Lahab had lost power, honour and dignity.

'As bin Wa'il faced similar humiliation. His sons had converted to Islam thus becoming his enemies, as he was an active enemy of Islam. Furthermore his sons did not take any inheritance from him. So in reality his lineage was broken.

This is Prophetic and factual.

Please read the exegesis and the historical background of this chapter to find out more details.

Conclusion

This chapter is truly unique and inimitable.

This chapter has less than 15 words yet briefly analysing this chapter more than 15 rhetorical devices and related features have been found. These features are not just mediocre attempts to please and persuade, rather they are sublime features that if removed or altered will distort the impact and communicative effect of the text.

Not one feature or any words can be changed or improved upon.

It doesn't stop there. In addition to the above this chapter is structured within its own literary form and linguistic genre.

How can a human being create a unique literary form and linguistic genre, select the most apt words placed in the most perfect arrangement, produce a unique rhythm and semantically orientated sounds, provide factual prophetic information in concise eloquent expression with an abundance of rhetorical devices, in less than 15 words?

It was no wonder that those best placed to challenge the Qur'an failed.

This article intends to provoke further questions and sufficiently stimulate the reader to research further, particularly the question of authorship of the Qur'an. At the heart of that question lies only a limited set of possible answers. The Qur'an can only have come from an Arab, a non-Arab, the Prophet - if you believe he had a mastery of Arabic better than the Arabs of his time - or, as Muslims suggest, the Creator, which only counts as a possible source if you believe in its existence (that is of course a subject unto itself but an important pre-requisite).

From the above evidence the Qur'an is acknowledged to be written with the utmost beauty and purity of Language. It is incontestably the standard of the Arabic tongue, inimitable by any human pen, and because it still exists today, it insists on as a permanent miracle sufficient to convince the world of its divine origin. If the Qur'an was written by Muhammad, why were not Arab scholars and linguists able to rival the Qur'an?

Bibliography & References

To be updated